

The following draft letter is offered by the City Neighborhood Council's Budget Committee for possible adoption by CNC at its March 26 meeting. It is a revision of the version that was circulated prior to and discussed at the Feb. 27 CNC meeting. Revision suggestions are welcome; please be specific about language you would add or change. Send comments to CNC Chair Chas Redmond at redmond@mac.com and to CNC Budget Committee Chair Chris Leman, cleman@oo.net or call 206-322-5463

CITY NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL LETTERHEAD

Seattle City Council Councilmembers
601 Fifth Avenue, second floor, PO Box 4749
Seattle, WA 98124-4749

RE: Suggested ways to better inform and involve the public in the budget process

To City Councilmember Tim Burgess and other members of the City Council's Special Committee on the Budget:

The City Neighborhood Council works to ensure that the public has access to information about the City budget and the budget decision process, and that the public is involved in the decisions reached. CNC welcomes the current effort by the City Council to find ways to better inform and involve the public in the budget process. We recognize that the City Council has more control over its own budget processes than it does with the Executive budget process.

Following are suggestions from CNC and the district councils on ways to inform and involve the public earlier and more meaningfully in budget decisions.

Possible Executive Branch initiatives in the period before presentation of the Mayor's proposed budget in September

- Establish an annual or biennial process with an early deadline (e.g. April 30) in which members of the public may nominate a project for consideration in the Capital Improvements Program.
- Collaborate with the Seattle Channel on a series of programs that explain the City budget and the process by which it is adopted; the City Budget Director could act as host-mentor for the series.
- Require the departments to provide by June 1 to the City Council and the public a mid-year budget report that tracks spending and results.
- Post a draft or detailed summary of the adopted budget (including budget provisos and statements of legislative intent) on the City web site by January 1 (the beginning of the official budget year). In past years this posting has not occurred until well into February, losing months in which the public could be getting to know the budget and helping the Mayor and City Council monitor the budget's implementation.

Possible City Council initiatives in the period before presentation of the Mayor's proposed budget in September

- Hold workshops to involve the public in discussions about spending programs (e.g. parks and recreation; public safety; health and human services; transportation; utilities; etc.) and revenue choices (e.g. different kinds of taxes; tax expenditures; bonds and levies; etc.).
- Collaborate with the Seattle Channel on a series of programs that explain the City budget and the process by which it is adopted; City Council Committee Chairs could host/mentor programs on their Committee's part of the budget.
- In collaboration with the executive branch, conduct public opinion surveys and focus groups on the public's preferences on spending and revenue.

- On the model of the “Budget Options” report issued annually by the U.S. Congressional Budget Office, publish by June of each year a report prepared by the City Council Central Staff that analyzes various possible spending and revenue options that are available for City action.
- At least once a year, update by City Council action a resolution on the Council’s priorities for bond and levy issues (including those that need to be referred to the voters, and those that the Council can itself adopt).

Possible City Council initiatives in the period after presentation of the Mayor’s proposed budget in September

- Require that the departments, in their initial budget presentations to the City Council, include data series and information on their five-year trend in (1) spending; (2) employee full time equivalents (including head office/field and management/nonmanagement breakdowns); and (3) contracting.
- Publish on the City web site at least two days before they are discussed at a City Council committee meeting or circulated to more than four members of the City Council, any of the following documents: questions posed to agencies; budget issue papers; proposed budget actions (“green sheets”); draft budget provisos; draft statements of legislative intent; and draft budget spreadsheets.
- CNC recommends that in October in addition to a public hearing on the budget held in the City Council chambers, the City Council hold at least two "regional" hearings with one serving the North and another serving the South regions of Seattle. We support a pilot effort for one or more additional hearings with a non-traditional format selecting speakers other than on a first come, first served basis (e.g. by having on-line and phone sign-ups and/or allocating speaking slots randomly).

Although we have listed Executive Branch and City Council initiatives separately, we urge that the executive and legislative branches collaborate with one another and with the City Neighborhood Council to increase the public’s awareness of the budget and how to effectively participate in budget decisions. This letter was discussed at CNC’s February 27 meeting and revised, and authorized at its March 26 meeting. [Ed. note - expected to be reviewed and voted on at March 26 CNC meeting.]

Sincerely,

Chas Redmond
Chair, City Neighborhood Council